

LANDON MACKENZIE: WRITING & MAPPING, ERASURE & DISCLOSURE

By Robin Laurence

The work is visual, hopefully sensual, and willfully over the top. I negotiate my way – over time – building the structure of the image. Material evidence of a terrain played against interior levels of the unspoken. I want the effect to parallel my efforts to move, as You do, between the overwhelming nature of the *Habitus* (everything) and the need to be grounded in some individual shred of agency (something). (1)

Palimpsest 1. A parchment from which one text has been removed in order to substitute another. 2. An inscribed slab or sheet of brass which has been turned back to front to hide an old inscription and leave room for a new one. (2)

Landon Mackenzie's art registers complex interactions of idea and influence, knowing and imagining, continuity and rupture. It also grapples with what it is to be -- and to become -- a painter in this time and place. A visit to her Vancouver studios might be titled not only "What Mackenzie Is Doing" but also "Where She Is Coming From" -- and indeed few contemporary artists as readily acknowledge the impact upon their work of their personal, familial, and educational histories. In addition to her large paintings-in-progress, which develop over a prolonged period of thinking and seeing, exploration and invention, under-painting and over-painting and adding and subtracting, her studios are filled with stacks of individual works on paper along with notebooks, sketchbooks, clipping files, and photograph albums. Mackenzie seems to revel in the wealth of experience such images, texts, and keepsakes represent. As she discusses her grandmother's accomplishments as a watercolourist, her great-uncle's expeditions into uncharted areas of the Canadian North, and her mother's multi-lingual childhood in Chile, her excitement is palpable.

Such narratives are not only intriguing but also decidedly relevant to the direction and shape of her career. Her "bohemian" Toronto childhood surrounded by progressive

art and artists and overseen by her parents' keen support of Canadian culture, previous generations of artists, explorers, and mining engineers in her family, summer holidays on an island in the Kawartha lakes region of Ontario, mentorship by family friend Harold Town, her conceptualist education at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, her formalist education at Concordia University, her travels to the Yukon and her immersion in the back-to-the-land ethos of 1970s counter-culture, all have contributed to the why, the what, and the how of her art-making. As well, her career has bounced around the track of recent Canadian art history without directly following it. Mackenzie has forged an independent practice in dialogue with but also resistance to the various art movements she encountered on her way to realizing the true nature of her vocation.

Beginning with the prints she produced in Halifax and Montreal during the 1970s and progressing through recent drawings and paintings in watercolour, ink, and other media, Mackenzie's works on paper are many and autonomous. They are not studies for the large paintings she is best known for, yet their strategies and motifs, their preoccupations and their processes, run in parallel channels to them. Both the big works on canvas and the smaller works on paper reveal how idea-driven and process-based art-making coincide in her practice. Both ways of working also manifest recurring series of seemingly simple motifs – spirals and vortices, steps and ladders, ovals, dots, squares, concentric rings, and strands of colour arranged in neuronal clusters or cartographic networks. Over the years, Mackenzie's motifs have taken on an iconographic presence without necessarily signifying a fixed meaning. They are associative rather than literal, connotative rather than denotative, and relate strongly to early interests and influences. For instance, a small, isolated square, first appearing in her prints and later in her paintings, may suggest to the viewer an aperture or opening into another realm while signifying for the artist an idea of home, a place where she can locate herself, even hide herself, within her art.(2) In another instance, the creation of graph-like grounds in her 1970s prints and the later interest in a ledger format, as seen in her 1997 performance script, *Accounting for an imaginary prairie life*, correspond with conceptual practices but also derive inspiration from her father's life when, under parental pressure, he was forced to set aside his academic aspirations and work as a chartered accountant.

The idea of elsewhere is also implicit in her works on paper. In her Vancouver studio, Mackenzie focuses on large canvases; when she is abroad -- travelling, teaching, or pursuing the opportunities of a residency -- she creates primarily on paper. Whether she is in Beijing, Berlin, or Paris, in Banff, Baie Saint-Paul, or Emma Lake, such works signal not only an irrepressible compulsion to create but also a need to synthesize elements of her urban or rural surround into a primarily imaginary space. Mackenzie hates the too-literal act of sketching from the landscape. Her art is less about depicting an actual place than about conceiving how the natural or built environment might be re-conceived, re-represented in contemporary art. History, geography, even transportation infrastructures are recorded on individual sheets of variously weighted paper or in bound notebooks. What she sets down there is essentially a visual form of ideation, of thinking through doing. The drawings reveal that she has been walking, talking, riding, tracing, and reading her way through new and old terrains. In some instances, such as during a sabbatical year in Berlin in 2007, Mackenzie has allowed her materials to direct the production of her work, employing successive layers of inks and gesso that she purchased in an artists' supply shop, which was located on the ground floor of the building in which she was renting a studio. Because the shop was closing after many decades in business, both loss and local history are embedded in her media and, consequently, in her imagery. It appears that while Mackenzie may attach image to circumstance, she simultaneously accomplishes the reverse, locating circumstance within a lexicon of signs and motifs deeply rooted in her psyche.

Mackenzie's canvases and works on paper share the important formal and conceptual strategies of handwriting and mapping, each act or enterprise inscribed within successive layers of imaging, erasure, and counter-imaging. This practice corresponds with an understanding of both *pentimento* and *palimpsest* effects, and originates in her early ventures into printmaking as a student in Halifax (later developed in Montreal). Arriving at NSCAD in 1972, at the age of seventeen, Mackenzie discovered that painting instruction had been jettisoned at the school in favour of an introduction to conceptual practice. Forced to reinvent her aspirations, she focused on drawing and printmaking and established a creative niche for herself in NSCAD's

famous print studio. Working her way through lithography (executed on old-fashioned stones) and serigraphy, she eventually settled on etching as her principal mode of expression and established process-based parameters for herself. She employed the same metal plate over and over, building up a dense ground of images and text and then scraping them away, creating archaeological layers of past works within each new one. At the same time, she repudiated a number of printmaking traditions, such as pulling a complete print edition and numbering, dating, and signing her images on the front of the paper.

A foundation course Mackenzie took at NSCAD with the American concrete poet and Fluxus artist Emmett Williams strongly influenced her and she began to explore text-based and scripto-visual strategies, hallmarks of conceptual and feminist art practice of the time. She continued employing hand-lettered and handwritten text in Montreal, during and after her graduate studies at Concordia, often printing words and phrases backwards or obscuring them with subsequent layers of imagery.⁽⁴⁾ Diaristic and indexical elements (such as naming places in which she had lived) suggest themselves but do not necessarily define the print work. (In some instances, the impulse is paradoxically anti-diaristic.) And although Mackenzie was not interested in creating abstract-expressionist calligraphy in the manner of, say, Cy Twombly, she was also not attracted to the conceptual project of using mechanical type to describe or document an idea. Instead, she used inversion and fragmentation to disrupt any direct or literal reading of her handmade texts, “camouflaging” the content so that it appeared simply as “stuff.” Again, the unintelligibility of the work corresponds with its process-driven nature, and with a palimpsest or pentimento inclination to formally assert and subsequently obscure her authorial hand.

In her prints, Mackenzie privileges means over ends, yet still arrives at a place of aesthetic engagement, the latter perhaps relating to the influence on her early work of Harold Town’s 1950s series of monotypes, which he titled “Single Autographic Prints.” A leading member of Painters Eleven, Town was a close friend of Mackenzie’s parents, and one of his autographic prints hung in the family’s Toronto home. Although Mackenzie as a child had been fully exposed to the plausibility – even the desirability --

of a visual arts career (her grandmother, great-grandmother, and uncle were all professional artists), she cites a visit to Town's studio in her teens as a revelatory event. "I went into Harold's studio and I just thought, 'I want this'" – this being a room of her own where she could make art.(5) Mackenzie was aware of the social expectations and gender roles that had constrained women artists of earlier generations. By contrast, Town's studio represented the exercise of individual agency, the carving out of a creative territory, and the full realization of a vocation, a calling.

Although Mackenzie's years of printmaking might be seen as a diversion from that true vocation, painting (which Town strongly encouraged her to pursue and which she finally embraced with her *Lost River Series* in 1981), their influence continues to resonate in her art. The pentimento and palimpsest effects and the use of clouds of handwriting, drifting in and out of revelation, dislocation, and intelligibility, were and are essential elements of her *Saskatchewan Paintings* and the two subsequent series that evolved from them, *Tracking Athabasca* and *Houbart's Hope*. Here, however, Mackenzie's cursive writing is not simply process-driven "stuff" but an investigation into the ways history is constructed and narratives are delivered. It manifests the extensive research the artist undertook while also "writing her body" into each big work, recording its "somatic language."(6) Also evident in the *Saskatchewan Paintings*, and in concomitant works on paper, is the particular form and motif of the oval, created through a stencilling process. The seemingly simple geometric device continues to find lodging in Mackenzie's art to this day. Initially painted in unrelenting black, it symbolized a void in the telling of history. It was the gaping absence – the erasure -- of the voices of First Nations and other marginalized peoples in the mainstream narrative of colonization and settlement. In Mackenzie's more recent works on paper, ovals may appear as concentric forms, sometimes outlined in dots and suggestive of swirling galaxies of light and energy, connecting our inner worlds – physical and metaphysical -- to the vast cosmos.

The mapping impulse that revealed itself in Mackenzie's *Saskatchewan Paintings* was reiterated in the hand-drawn, foldout map she glued into *Accounting for an imaginary prairie life*, and has found subsequent, urban iterations in the works on paper

so prolifically produced during residencies in Paris and Berlin. Mackenzie attributes her employment of cartography, as both image and strategy, to her childhood delight in repeatedly looking through *Lands Forlorn* by her great-uncle, the explorer George Mellis Douglas. Published in 1914 and considered “one of the classics of northern literature,” the book is an account of Douglas’s 1911-12 expedition to Great Bear Lake, the Dismal Lakes, and the lower Coppermine River in search of copper deposits.(7) With its splendid maps and photographs, *Lands Forlorn* stimulated Mackenzie’s fascination with the idea of North. In her reckoning, this idea is divided into “the Far North,” exemplified by Douglas’s Arctic explorations, and “the Near North”, the Ontario cottage country where she spent family holidays and where, not-incidentally, her esteemed great-uncle taught her how to paddle a canoe. (Canoes, too, have recurred in her art as both symbol and motif.) Into this imaginary space, she inserted her concerted physical presence, spending summers in the 1970s with her partner as a “bush hippie” in the Yukon.

Urban cartography is an important point of departure in the *Neurocity* series of canvases and works on paper, as it is in other, more recent works that “map out human systems of movement, thought, and convergence.”(8) Although the project initially seems improbable, Mackenzie confidently and successfully conflates neuroscientific research and our contemporary understanding of the workings of the human brain with maps of urban transportation systems -- or of rivers, canals, or streets leading to and from public squares. Lines, ladders, lattices, concentricities, spider-web-like forms contribute to a kind of mapping of the urban realm, its social delights and engineering glories along with its appalling acts of oppression and destruction. The mind reveals its own engineering glories and distressing malfunctions, so that a seemingly diagrammatic drawing of subway lines in Paris or Berlin functions equally as a metaphoric depiction of a neuronal network, a nexus of bounding electrical impulses.

As she did in her earliest works on paper, Mackenzie continues to bind together concept and materiality and to choreograph what initially appear to be simple formal devices and strategies into a complex dance between interior and exterior realities. Over the past 40 years, she has made her own way between orthodoxies without being

snagged by them. Just as her great uncle George Douglas mapped his passage into the Canadian Arctic, Mackenzie paints, draws, and writes her way through the geography of her imagination.

ENDNOTES

1. Landon Mackenzie, *Accounting for an imaginary prairie life: performance script* (artist's book, produced in conjunction with performances aligned with the touring exhibition *Landon Mackenzie: Saskatchewan Paintings*, 1997), p.8.
 2. Edward Lucie-Smith, *Dictionary of Art Terms* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), p.139.
 3. Landon Mackenzie, in conversation with the author, April 3, 2015. Unless otherwise noted, all direct and indirect quotes from the artist derive from this marathon, five-hour interview, and from follow-up e-mail and telephone conversations.
 4. Some of the backwards writing in Mackenzie's prints was intended – satirically -- to be deciphered using a reflection in a small, handheld, make-up mirror, the kind post-war women were thought to carry in their purses. Fully immersed in the counter-culture, Mackenzie and her friends carried no such mirrors with them.
 5. Robin Laurence, "Pentimentalist/The Painted Underworld of Landon Mackenzie" (*Border Crossings*, Vol. 15, No. 3, July 1996), p.17.
 6. Charlotte Townsend-Gault, "Saskatchewan of the Mind", in *Landon Mackenzie: Saskatchewan Paintings* (Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 1996).
 7. Richard S. Finnie, *George Mellis Douglas (1875-1963)*, Arctic Institute of North America, <http://arctic.synergiesprairies.ca/arctic/index/view/2115>.
 8. Rhonda Barber, (Foreword), *Landon Mackenzie: Nervous Centre* (Calgary: Esker Foundation, 2012), p.1.
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